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A VISIT TO LADY GREGORY

BY SIGNE TOKSVIG

To get from Dublin to Coole Park, the home of Lady Gregory, one normally takes a train from Dublin to Athenry, and another from Athenry to Gort, the village nearest to Coole. But times were not exactly normal in Ireland when my husband and I visited it last summer, and when we got to Athenry we were confronted by the blank fact that for two months or so no trains had been running to Gort. Why? This was a rhetorical question. We knew very well that armed policemen must have been trying to travel on that train, and that the engineer had excused himself for an indefinite period, and that we had better find a Ford. We found one. It was very rickety and full of unwieldy first-aid-to-the-injured-auto things, but Gort was twenty miles away, and hope and beauty had long since left Athenry, and so we squeezed in and began to bump over stony Connaught.

It is very like stony New England, except for the important fact that the Pilgrim, after all, had a good-sized field when he had picked the stones off it and set them up as boundaries, whereas some of these "fields" of Connaught were no larger than vegetable beds, it seemed to me, and yet the stones were piled high around them. Still, the sun shone a little, and in the pale light of rainy summer this gray-green landscape had its own wistful charm. Here and there, too, the madder-red of a Galway petticoat gleamed in a small yellow cornfield, and girls let their sickles fall to look at us. The country grew more lonely and more wild. The little fields choked under the stones. Sheep strayed about, and long-legged, ravenous pigs. No country estate was visible, and the sun was failing. Then we saw a long stretch of high gray stone wall and a mass of gloomy trees behind it. But this was Tillyra, we were told, and we knew it for the Norman retreat of Edward Martyn, famous in his own right as a playwright, and also as a large part

of George Moore's *Ave atque Vale*. We were later to visit him, with Lady Gregory, but now we thought only of Coole Park, and here suddenly it was—gray stone wall, venerable trees, and a quick, dark-haired woman to open the lodge gates. For what seemed to me a long while we drove through the park, still and lovely and darkening in the twilight. After another gate the thick leaves met overhead, and water dripped somewhere in a dim ravine. I had begun to feel that our car was violating Faery, when we drove into a great open meadowy place with haystacks on it, and in the centre, a tall, white, square, unromantic house.

Outside was a little black figure welcoming us. This was Lady Gregory, and as I had never seen her before, I noticed her fresh complexion, bright penetrating brown eyes, white hair black-veiled, slight tendency to stoutness, black mourning clothes and little black silk apron. She was most cordial, even to me, the unknown marital adjunct of a man whom she knew and liked, and we went into the tall white house.

Now there is one advantage in being young and unimportant and a marital adjunct, and this is that if one is silent, nobody notices. The conversation of the principals goes right on. And meanwhile one is left free to make observations. This inestimable advantage I had most of the time I was at Coole Park, and it thrilled me. Seriously. In an otherwise drab college course on the "drama," the great discoveries had been Synge and Yeats and Lady Gregory,—*Riders to the Sea*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and *The Rising of the Moon*. And here I was free and alone to explore this house, the very hearth where Irish revival had warmed itself.

The drive had been cold, and I sat close to the fire while the principals exchanged comment on absent friends. Lady Gregory wanted to know about John Quinn, and probably she found out, but I looked at the dark, tall, rich room, lit by fluttering candles. Her beautiful warm voice and easy manner went well with this library. The room had been accumulated in no frantic haste. One could imagine its growth from generation to generation until its present opulent age,—worn oriental rugs and curtains, walls of books in old gilt-leather bindings, solid furniture with

the sheen of years, and fading red damask coverings. And paintings of frilled men, carvings, statuettes, miniatures, and a real lock of Napoleon's hair under his miniature next to the fireplace.

In the dining-room there was a splendid Zurbaran monk, and that was all I noticed until, candle in hand, Lady Gregory led me up the wide stairs to my room. The walls above the stairs were covered with sketches by Augustus John and Jack Yeats, and rows of eminent, engraved Englishmen who had been members of a famous breakfast club to which Sir William Gregory had belonged. They looked almost incredibly mild, dignified, and benevolent. Altogether different was an aggressive little sketch of Lady Gregory by Augustus John, far from flattering, but one which I could see represented something in her character—an angular fighting mood, which probably has carried her through many a storm at the Abbey Theatre. Not that I know that there ever have been any storms at the Abbey; this is only a supposition of mine, drawn from long observation of other small groups working together for the betterment, artistic or political, of their community.

Lady Gregory left me in my room with the casual remark that the Shaws (G. Bernard) always had this room, and that he might have been there at that very moment if he hadn't had to go to Parknasilla in Kerry. I think it was Parknasilla, but I felt with a reverential thrill that at least an epigram of his might still be lurking in the black shadows made blacker by my trembling candle. It was a cavernous room. I barely saw tapestried chairs and books and a huge white-frilled canopied bed. There were roses on a white dressing table. I went to open a window. It opened on the thickest, darkest, chilliest, quietest night that ever was since the creation of night. The darkness stole into the room and buried my candle, and the silence made my thoughts seem loud. I knew then why poets come to Coole.

The quietude of Coole I shall always remember. During the week I was there it seemed to me ludicrous to believe that the crossing of Broadway and Sixth Avenue was in the same world. Through the big house the maids moved almost unseen and always unheard. With one exception. One night after dinner

we were sitting in the library, and, unbelievable as it seemed, there were human voices coming from the dining-room. Lady Gregory got up, opened the door softly, and looked in. She said nothing, only looked for an instant, but that conversation stopped as if cut off with a knife. This was the only time we saw our hostess as a grande dame. Otherwise she was as simple and friendly with her servants as she was with the farmers roundabout, with her friends and with her guests. But she couldn't tolerate the breaking of the seal of silence. For one who wasn't doing creative work, Coole was almost uncomfortably quiet. I came near to a feeling of relief one morning when I heard from Lady Gregory's work-room a certain staccato sound that I knew well, and learned that she wrote her plays on a typewriter, and not, as I in my innocence had supposed, with a swan's quill.

That afternoon I found the garden. The rare glow of sunshine lay on the high gray walls, hung with yellow drooping roses and reddening vines and waxy white flowers. A broad shadowed walk ran the length of the wall. There was an enchanting vista of it from the garden gate. I went slowly along, crushing rosemary between my fingers, and wondering at the dark groups of stately Irish yews. At the end of the garden I found a gate in the wall, a big, old, rusty and green gate through which I peered at a wet wilderness of trees and mossy stones. One path plunged into it, but I couldn't tease the gate open. So I turned, and behind me, under a huge tree, I found a little graveyard. At least I found three pathetic small headstones—one for "Poor Little Prinnie," dead in 1800, another for "Trim," and another for "Gyp." I sentimentalized a bit. Up the garden, on the other side I discovered a sort of shrine of dark bending boughs and clustering ivy screening a Roman bust—Virgil, I thought, or Quintus Horatius Flaccus, set there by eighteenth century admiration. A little further on I met Lady Gregory, red-cheeked, brown-eyed, black-robed, with a nice housewifely basket on her arm. She gave me a bunch of grapes. Encouraged by this into asking questions, I said, "Would you mind telling me the history of that bust over there?" "Not at all," she answered, "that's a bust of Maecenas. We used to have him in the little bathroom

downstairs, and got very tired of him there, and so we put him outside." Well, there wasn't much romance here, and I tried the little graveyard. "Oh, that's where my husband's mother used to bury her pug-dogs. She was very fond of pug-dogs." I dropped the attempt to discover Romance for myself.

Lady Gregory was a better guide. She took me first to her "autograph tree," a big copper-beech, not very coppery, but blessed beyond all other trees in a trunk full of monograms that cover the whole Irish literary revival. I cannot remember them all. There was "G. B. S." for George Bernard Shaw,—the boldest letters of them all,—and a modest "J. M. S." for Synge, a "W. B. Y." for Yeats, a "J. B." and a small donkey for his brother Jack, a "D. H." for Douglas Hyde, an "A. E." for George Russell, a new white "L. R." for Lennox Robinson, an "A. J." for Augustus John, and others and others and others.

Then we went to the big gate at the end of the garden, and in it there was a little door that I hadn't seen before, and near the door hung a large key, and the key opened the door. We were in the Seven Woods of Coole.

It had rained all summer, and masses of foliage clung together, dripping, overgrown. Black wet branches, patched with livid fungi, twisted before us, and mosses and ferns ran in thick waves over the path, over stones, over every fallen tree. It was an orgy of greens and rotting browns. And the stillness was deeper than night. I began to glance covertly at Lady Gregory, and tried to think of Yeats's—

I know of the leafy paths that the witches take,
Who come with their crowns of pearl and their spindles of wool,
And their secret smile, out of the depths of the lake. . . .

She had said she was going to take me down to the lake, and she was talking about wool. But it was wool in the form of twenty-four fleeces. They and some carriage blankets had been stolen from a loft not long ago. "And did you go to the police?" I inquired idly, pricking up my ears quickly enough when she said, "Oh no, I went to the Sinn Fein Volunteers, and in a week they had caught the thief and restored the things. Now I have asked them to find out who took a wire fence I'd recently set up." I

wanted to ask many more questions about Republican Ireland, but I knew she preferred not to talk "politics."

Instead, she talked forestry. Lady Gregory cares for the seven woods in a very practical way, and she showed me groves of young trees and saplings she had had planted. "Nearly all my book royalties grow into trees," she said. I liked the commonsense streak in her. Gradually I was beginning to find that she kept herself in no aesthetic citadel, that the hospitality of her mind was as generous as her house. I began to see that a poet could also be a wise and straightforward human being; something which before had only seemed true of A. E. She talked of America, without a taint of even benevolent condescension, and with a surprising affection. "I had to go over there just before Christmas, and I hated to spend the holidays away from my family on the rough, cold, gray Atlantic, and in a new country; and then the people over there amazed me by taking me into their homes, and being so kind to me that I shall never forget it."

It began to be a long walk through the wet strange woods, and I saw no lake, but this I forgot when she mentioned Yeats, and told me how he had come there year after year, bringing the very people who needed Coole. That, naturally, she didn't say, still it is apparent what wild, simple, lovely Connaught has done for the work of Jack Yeats, for instance, who was painting conventional sweet pictures of Devonshire before his brother brought him to Coole. She told me—and this somehow made the woods enchanted—that Synge had liked to run through them and by the lake for hours and hours.

Very soon after, we came to the lake.

It is long and rather narrow, and the woods recede a little from it, leaving a green strand with a path lightly marked on moss and grasses. Far out, sailing around dark islets, I saw the wild swans of Coole, shy guests of every autumn. On another walk when I was alone and could indulge myself I picked up two of their white curling feathers, making the mean excuse to myself of needing souvenirs. I don't know where they are now, but I remember finding them at the sombre edge of the woods, and peering in and being afraid to go further, because I had the property of the swans in my pocket and the green stillness was

faintly threatening. If I must confess it, I ran all the way home, with a sudden black squall chasing at my heels in what seemed to me a very personal manner. Luckily, I didn't have to run through the woods, since on the first walk Lady Gregory took me home by a short cut through the fields. Let those who want to, laugh,—after an experience I had on a fairy island in Kerry I make apologies to no one.

The next day I was alone in the high silent library with my hostess. Until then she had treated me with exquisite courtesy and consideration, but strictly as a member of the general category "guest." Now, in her quick way, she left her desk and sat down next me. As her bright brown eyes fixed mine I felt myself changing from a guest to an individual. "Tell me what you have done, and what you are going to do," she said, and the tone of her voice completed the change in me. It was warm and kind, and uncomfortably full of concentration on me—not on me as the inoffensive marital adjunct of a visiting friend, but me as a body expected to answer for my real self. I don't mean by this that her tone held me up and demanded the immediate unfolding of my soul, as I was once held up by a wealthy suburban woman who asked me loudly in front of a number of people, "Now come, what's your specialty? Tell me all about yourself and what your specialty is." Both times I felt uneasy at being dragged from a decent obscurity, but the causes were entirely different. Before the achievements of Lady Gregory one had a right to shrink from uncovering the disordered perfunctoriness of one's own past and future. And then she showed me that dispelling uneasiness was another of her achievements. I realized how it is that she has become a recorder of the withdrawn songs and legends of the "thatched houses," and how it is that she learned their speech, not only Gaelic, but their cadenced, colored English, "the Gaelic construction, the Elizabethan phrases," the quick turn and fresh invention. I felt—as farmers, stone-cutters, workhouse wards, beggars must have felt—that here was a woman without mockery, a human being in whom there was the safety of kindness, and a keen simplicity of interest that warranted understanding. Those who have read her own creative works and compilations of Irish poetry, history and legend, and who

know the Irish peasant, will know how faithfully and beautifully she has preserved this amazingly imaginative language. Synge knew it, and learned from her "the dialect he had been trying to master." Yeats knew it, and she collaborated with him in the writing of most of his plays, especially *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

I can't help quoting from her life of Raftery, a Connaught poet, whose songs she patiently gathered from the memories of the countryside. It is from Raftery's Lament for Thomas O'Daly, a fiddler and piper: "The swans on the water are nine times blacker than a blackberry since the man died from us that had pleasantness on the top of his fingers. His two gray eyes were like the dew of the morning that lies on the grass. And since he was laid in the grave, the cold is getting the upper hand." Lady Gregory says about this poem, "I have been helped to put it into English by a young working farmer, sitting by a turf fire one evening, when his day in the fields was over."

Even in my short stay in the barony of Kiltartan, I heard phrases of delight, fragments of wit and rhythm, that made me wish for a good memory more than anything else has ever done. There was John, Lady Gregory's coachman, and one thing he said I shall never forget. We were driving back from Gort through the leafy twilight of the park, and I tried very cautiously to see how John felt about the fairies. He pooh-poohed them eagerly, almost too eagerly. "Why, Miss, there's no one would go near this place after dark, but many a night I've stayed up with a sick cow and never seen anything in it worse than myself." Then he grew thoughtful, and pointed with his whip to a path that ran up a little hill. "Do you see the rabbits now, and they running up that hill?" I did. "Well," continued John, "there last week, I set a trap for them, and never one of them came near the hill. Then I took it away. And that same night they all came trooping back, till you wouldn't know was it right rabbits were in it!" He paused and laughed a little nervously. Then he said—and this is my prize souvenir: "Would you be knowing a gentleman, I wonder, who used to come here every year to stay with her ladyship? His name was Mr. Yeats. He was always running around in the woods a'snipin' for the fairies."

Both for that exquisite picture and for many others I am grateful to gentle John Devaney.

The night before we left, I think it was, Lady Gregory read to us from her life of Sir Hugh Lane. I, being ignorant of most English and Irish affairs, really knew nothing about Sir Hugh Lane except that he was a great collector of old masters, and an art dealer, and that he was drowned on the *Lusitania*. I didn't know that he was Lady Gregory's nephew. This relationship disquieted me a little, because In Memoriams, even of strangers, are seldom real. So when she began to read from the proofs my attention was merely polite. This indifference lasted less than a minute. In the first place, Lady Gregory reads so beautifully that one can't help listening to her; in the second place (which really ought to be the first) the *Life of Sir Hugh Lane* is an appealing, adventurous, honest book. I doubt if anything Lady Gregory has ever written is as simple and beautiful as the first chapters describing her sister, Adelaide Persse, her unhappy marriage to Mr. Lane, and the brave youth of the son Hugh. And the story of his self-denials and his successes is almost uncannily interesting. It is an Aladdin romance with a tragic ending.

From that evening we learned clearly that the passion of Lady Gregory is to help preserve and develop the arts of Ireland. What she has done in the literary field is well known; it is not so well known that since her nephew's death she has been trying to carry on his work. He bent his life toward giving Dublin a great museum of art, so that the students of art might have worthy models. On an accidental technicality in his will, London acquired half the masterpieces that were meant for Dublin. Lady Gregory has been working ever since trying to get them back. She told us of her hopes for the Municipal Gallery in Dublin, with its portraits of famous Irishmen of the new generation, and where she also wants portraits of Irishmen who have become famous elsewhere. "Can't you get some American to donate a painting of Peter Dunne?" she asked. And then we talked about the Abbey theatre, and about the all too enchanting idea of having a real Abbey theatre in New York to which the Dublin players could "graduate," so to speak.

The following day Lady Gregory drove us to Galway, the next stage in our journey. That drive is vivid in my mind. As we went through Gort, she showed us the workhouse, a gray and ivied building, where she had sat many an evening by the turf-fire, quietly listening to such good purpose as *The Workhouse Wards* and many a resurrected poem and legend prove. Soon we left the green fields around Gort and came into a country that was like a world petrified. If the stretch between Athenry and Gort was stony, that between Gort and Burren was stone itself. It was the waste dominion of stone. Hills of it slept in the distance, the fields were great gray sheets of it, and only where it broke into boulders and pebbles a few sheep nibbled faint grass-straws. At long intervals a thatched hut clung to the smooth rock, but for miles we were alone with the hard grayness. And then a miracle happened. A cloudy sunlight shone and all the stone turned to silver. Yet "silver" is too simple a word to use about the soft luminous white of the naked hills that rose before us in long unbroken lines against a sky where blue melted into green above them. That radiance was unearthly, and, partly to come back to earth, I made the sage remark that certainly no life had ever existed on those barren hills, without so much as a suspicion of moss on them. Lady Gregory smiled. "Indeed it has," she said. "Here was a favorite resort of the holy hermits; traces of them have been found on top of the hills."

"What did they have to eat?" I asked brutally, and she answered, "I know what one of them had once," and I begged for the story. The story was that one of the holy men who lived by himself up there in sacred meditation came of very good family. In fact, his brother was a king, King Guaire of Connaught. The saint's name was Marbhan. Now one day the king was sitting down to a particularly good dinner—it was really more in the nature of a banquet, and, being a very kind man as well as a king, he said to his courtiers, "Isn't it the shame of the world that here we sit with a fine dinner before us, and there is my poor brother up in the Burren hills with nothing but watercress and maybe a handful of nuts?" No sooner had he said this than, presto, unseen hands removed the dinner, and in a twinkling

had it before the saint, who, it is to be hoped, ate it. Imprints of angelic footsteps are still to be seen on the Burren hills.

"You never heard of King Guaire?" Lady Gregory asked. I shook my head. "Why, he was so generous," she said, "that his right arm grew longer than his left, because he stretched it out so often to give alms to the poor. And he was so kind that once when his royal cloak had caught on a bush he couldn't bear to take it away from the bush but left it right there. And he was rewarded for that. He had a great many poets at his court, and the wives of the poets were full of many whims, and sometimes it wasn't easy to fulfil the laws of hospitality. In the middle of winter one poet's wife insisted that she must have some blackberries. The good king sent messengers far and wide, but there were no blackberries to be had. He sent them out again, and this time one of them came back with a basketful. *Where* had he found them? Ah, on a bush covered with the king's own royal cloak, under which they had ripened nicely." And then, as Lady Gregory says in *Saints and Wonders*, where I later found the same story, "then there was no reproach on the King's house."

Soon we were over the hills in Burren, the Atlantic was wide before us, and we rested a while in the pleasant little sea lodge that belongs to Coole Park. Then we drove on through Kinvara and Oranmore to Galway. Often on the road, English military lorries full of soldiers with rifles at the ready made our little car skip for its and our lives, and I saw Lady Gregory's face grow stern. Nobody spoke. In Galway we said good-bye to her.

That week at Coole made many impressions on me, but none deeper than one night when, candle in hand, Lady Gregory was saying good night to me and added: "Now I'm going to say my prayer for the Lord Mayor of Cork. I've said it every evening since he has been on hunger strike. It is the one in the prayer book for a sick person 'when there appeareth small hope of recovery.'" She said this with an expression and a warmth which left me feeling that here was a woman who loved Ireland of the present as well as Ireland of the past. She, also, will have helped make possible the Ireland of the future.

SIGNE TOKSVIG.